DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 461 033 CE 082 790

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TITLE The Group as Teacher: The Gestalt Peer-Learning Community as a Vehicle for Organisational Healing.
PUB DATE 2001-09-00
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Conference of the European Society for Research on the Education of Adults (Lisbon, Portugal, September 13-16, 2001).
AVAILABLE FROM For full text: http://www.ulusofonaopt/inst/eventos/esrea/papers/paul barber.pdf.
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adjustment (to Environment); Adoption (Ideas); Adult Learning; Case Studies; *Change Agents; Foreign Countries; *Gestalt Therapy; Group Dynamics; *Group Experience; Learning Processes; Learning Theories; Models; *Organizational Change; Organizational Climate; Organizational Communication; Organizational Development; Peer Influence; *Peer Teaching; Theory Practice Relationship; Universities; Work Environment
IDENTIFIERS England; *Learning Communities; *Work Based Learning

ABSTRACT

The possibility of using a Gestalt-informed peer learning community to facilitate reflective learning and organizational change was explored. A peer learning community model exists that is based on two approaches to working with mental illness--therapeutic community practice (which is based on treating the community group rather than individuals within it) and Gestalt therapy (which works primarily with what we can see, hear, and feel, rather than with what is thought or interpreted). The concepts of therapeutic community practice and Gestalt were incorporated into a model for facilitating peer learning. The model subsequently served as the basis for a 2-day workshop on group facilitation at a consultancy in central England. At the company founder's request, the workshop was eventually expanded into an intervention designed to overcome resistance to change by fostering a peer learning community within an established organizational culture. Within a 6-month period, in conjunction with a University, a commercially based masters in change was developed with a cross-section of 24 participants from the company's management to its shop floor. The intervention produced substantial gains in developing individuals in the areas of self-awareness and interpersonal awareness and in fostering motivation and an appreciation of team and organizational dynamics. (Contains 35 references.) (MN)

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ED 461 033

# The Group as Teacher:

## The Gestalt Peer-Learning Community

## as a Vehicle for Organisational Healing

*Paul Barber (2002)*

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# THE GROUP AS TEACHER: THE GESTALT PEER-LEARNING COMMUNITY AS A VEHICLE FOR ORGANISATIONAL HEALING

**Abstract**

*This paper attempts to illustrate how a Gestalt informed peer-learning community might be employed to facilitate reflective learning and organisational change. The first part of this paper explores how this model grew out from Therapeutic Community practice (Main 1946), through an application of Gestalt and field theory principles (Parlett 1991). This model's transition from its Therapeutic Community origins, where the rationale is analytic and opaque, towards a humanistic Gestalt culture where learning and inquiry are transparent, is also described prior to a review of it's educational application within the group strand of a masters programme. The second part of this paper explores the potential of a Gestalt informed peer learning community to engender organisational change and healing. Running parallel to this review is a case study of change in a university setting and the fostering of a peer learning community within an established organisational culture. Within the text, analysis of organisational culture is performed through the application of a diagnostic tool derived from the Gestalt's contact-withdrawal cycle (Critchley & Casey 1989), and Field Theory (Lewin 1952; Parlett 1993). Through case review the author also examines the drama of introducing a peer learning community into an commercial culture, before evaluating its success through the voices of participants within a collaborative action research inquiry. Lastly, the author illuminates learning he has accrued as a change agent, and offers insights to help others who may wish to establish similar peer-learning communities in commercial settings.*

***Key words***: Group; Gestalt; Peer-Learning Community; Organisational Healing; Change.

# THE GROUP AS TEACHER: THE GESTALT PEER-LEARNING COMMUNITY AS A VEHICLE FOR ORGANISATIONAL HEALING

Paul Barber (June 2001)

*"Deep within every life, no matter how dull or ineffectual it may seem from the outside, there is something eternal happening. This is the secret way that change and possibility conspire with growth. John Henry Newman summed this up beautifully with the idea that to grow is to change and to be perfect is to have changed often. Change, therefore, need not be threatening; it can in fact bring our lives to perfection" (O'Donohue 1997 p164).*

***Preamble**: To motivate and develop personnel while fostering a co-operative team spirit presents a major challenge for the business community of the 21st Century (Waitley 1995; RSA 1995). This paper sets out to examine the gains and costs of using a Gestalt informed peer learning community within a commercially based masters to nurture such co-operation and development. The text first examines the origins of the Therapeutic Community, the ancestor of the model described, before exploring how Gestalt (Parlett 1991) was used to inform the educational and inquiry base. Upon ancient maps, in locations where danger was thought to exist, the traveller was warned "there be dragons". This account raises awareness to the organisational dragons that await change agents. Finally, the author surveys his learning as a change agent in the context of the study.*

## The Nature of Gestalt - Being Here Now

Gestalt, as a phenomenological and whole field qualitative research tool, works primarily with what we can see, hear and feel, rather than what is thought or interpreted. This is not to say that intellect and interpretation are dismissed, but rather that conceptualisation comes second to the refinement of "immediate experience" and a "felt sense" (Yontef 1996) in the building of a `picture of awareness'. Awareness is then stalked by exploration of the group's immediate experience of their environment. In this context, `raising awareness' is both a method of inquiry and a desired result of intervention. In this regard, groups are not so much tools for qualitative inquiry, as the data itself on a journey of discovery.

**The Therapeutic Community - A Direct Ancestor of the Gestalt informed Peer-Learning Community**

The term "therapeutic community" was first used by Tom Main (1946) to describe a "social milieu" whole field approach to mental illness that evolved at the Northfield's Military Hospital during the last war. This model, which treated the community group rather than the individuals within it, held individuals responsible to the community, while inviting them to experiment with more satisfying patterns of relating and communal decision making. At the same time as Main was developing his vision via family therapy at the Cassel Hospital, his colleague Maxwell Jones (1952) began experimenting with large group analysis with sociopaths at the Henderson Hospital (Rappoport 1960). The author believes it is no accident that this community approach to mental health was born in a time of war, in the military where alienation was rife, and during a period when society was itself dis-at-eased.

In behavioural terms, the Therapeutic Community (TC), though analytically informed, akin to field theory (Lewin 1952) and Gestalt (Parlett 1991) emphasises the wider organisational context to which the individual relates. Focusing upon the systemic energy of the immediate community, it attempts to shape group culture through "democratic decision-making", "efficient communication", "experimentation" and "reality confrontation" (Rapoport 1960, 80). Underpinning this approach is the working hypothesis that an individual's "pathology is related to stressful environments, deficient group leadership and low moral" (Jensen 1980). This implies that disease is to be found not only in our physiological body but also in our `socio-cultural and organisational body', which can similarly benefit from therapeutic intervention.

Where militarism and functionalism of the Thirties welded the individual to the nation's "War Machine", the TC from the late Forties sought to set them free:

> *"The therapeutic community involves the total community in a culture of enquiry into the nature of social processes within, and how these truly succeed or fail in caring for the specific individuals in it..." (Main 1980).*

The above `culture of enquiry', in the author's experience, goes much deeper in terms of developing the affect and emotional intelligence, than the learning company (Pedler et al 1997) or peer learning community (Heron 1974).

From the 1940's through to the 1970's the TC was viewed as a counter-cultural force, but by the 1980's it began to impact more widely upon conventional practice and to shed its status as a "movement" for the mantle of an accepted "method". A which time it also gained recognition as an instrument for training (Gauthier 1980; Hawkins 1980).

The author's first encounter with the embryonic Therapeutic "Educational" Community (TEC) occurred at the Henderson Hospital in the early 1970's, where in order to replicate a TC experience, rotation was encouraged between small analytic groups, experiential workshops, seminars, cooking and cleaning groups, plus a large community group some 30-40 strong.

On the original course (1972) Stuart Whitely - Director of the Henderson - held the analytic reins, while John Heron - Director of the Human Potential Inquiry Group at the University of Surrey - injected humanism and encounter. The author was particularly impressed by the blend of intellectual and experiential learning produced. What really worked well - and had not been planned - was the healthy antagonism between psychoanalysis and humanistic psychology; one analytic and containing, the other exploratory and socially engaging. Two contrasting ends of the human inquiry continuum were hereby brought together.

**Group as Teacher - Towards a Lewinian and Gestalt Model of Learning**

Following his attendence on the above programme, as an educator interested in "community" and affective education (Krathwol et al 1964), the author experimented with integrating Rapoport's (1960) principles of therapeutic community practice into his teaching, with the effect:

> *"Content was still transmitted and students still sat exams, but we paused more often to reflect upon `what we were doing' and `how we were doing it'. Simply, we began to examine the social cement that held us together. As a consequence, energy rose, learners seemed to show greater emotional commitment and my teaching gained a `real life' feel and a social inquiry edge" (Barber 1996).*

But there was still something missing. The analytic bias seemed to venerate the teacher`s authority while infantilising the student.

As director of the Certificate of Therapeutic Community Practice at the Royal College of Nursing, the author was given opportunity to develop the model further. Becoming frustrated with what were taken to be analytic givens, such as the necessity of transference, the author began to feed in qualitative inquiry and field theory through the medium of Gestalt (Parlett 1991). Gestalt, which emphasises dialogue, the creation of authentic relationships and holistic phenomenological inquiry, helped loosen the TEC from it`s analytic roots in two ways:

*i) It brought and field theory (Lewin 1952) with it's holistic vision and phenomenological inquiry into the frame, to support open experimentation rather than the workings of a mysterious "analytically inspired" unconscious. What were previously taken to be "analytic givens" now become "working hypotheses for testing".*

*ii) It countered the pathological orientation of psychoanalysis, where the facilitator remains distant and opaque so as to invite transference (emotionalised prior learning), and in place promoted a facilitative transparency which encouraged quality person-to-person contact, authentic dialogue and collaborative inquiry within the present, in contrast to a fixation upon the effects of the past.*

The above tailoring of Gestalt to peer learning was subsequently transported to Surrey University and the group strand of the MSc in Change Agent Skills and Strategies (Barber 1996). This part-time, 2 year modular masters programme, largely instigated by John Mulligan who had himself

worked in therapeutic community settings, supported an ongoing peer learning community within the framework of fifteen 5-day experiential workshops spread over eighteen months, where:

> *"In the first year students explore Learning to Learn (1), Change and Developmental Processes in the Individual (2), within Groups and Teams (3) and within Organisations (4). In the second year they address Change Agent Skills and Strategies at the Individual level (5), in Groups and Teams (6) and within the Organisation (7). Module 8, Qualitative Research Methods, is designed to run concurrently alongside the others to cement the whole together. Structurally, each module is designed with 2-3 contact blocks of 5 days duration interspersed at 4-6 weekly intervals. These blocks are akin to experiential workshops in character and provide opportunity for investigation, experimentation and skill rehearsal." (Barber 1996).*

In theory, within the above programme, everything, including content is experientially addressed and the grading of assignments is open to negotiation. In practice, tutors as academic examiners with the support of the University behind them exercise immense political power. But, within these boundaries participants create individualised learning contracts, put a learning strategy into action and assess their learning outcomes via self and peer assessment (Tosey & Gregory 1998). Written assignments for each module are likewise self, peer and tutor assessed, and a dissertation researching a personally facilitated act of change agency completes the academic requirement.

In regard to the tutor's role, their facilitation style ideally moves from the stance of an authoritative reference and culture carrier at the beginning of the programme, to that of an influential peer by the second year. In reality, an over-concern with academic criteria pertaining to assignments and dissertations and the control needs of staff, can all too readily limit peer and the learning community's political effectiveness.

Hopefully this review has orientated you to the origins of the Gestalt inspired peer community, and contextualised the masters programme - the organisational intervention cited in this paper.

**Into the Dragon's Lair - Some Organisational Resistance's to Change**

Following a well received 2 day external workshop on group facilitation within a consultancy in central England, the company founder and it's Chairman approached me with a view to developing his organisation further. As most staff, including the major power holders, had been recruited personally by him in the 1980's through seminaries which incorporated a potent mixture of group encounter and charismatic spirituality, he exercised enormous political power and personal control within company-life.

As discussions progressed a commercially cited masters in change was suggested, but negotiations were not plain sailing. Initially, the University saw the company's eagerness to get things under way as pushy and naive, and the company saw the University's slow over-careful response time as faint-hearted. Due to the University's caution, the company, largely in retaliation became nit-picking and legalistic with regard to contractual arrangements and guarantees. But this resistance, the author suggests, was symptomatic of another dynamic explored below.

Gestalt informed consultants (Critchley and Casey 1989) see organisations as living fields which sometimes become stuck within a "sensation-withdrawal cycle". They suggest that all living things, organisations included, meet their needs by organically moving through the following developmental stages:

***sensation*** (sensory feedback from the self and environment);
***awareness*** (alertness to feelings and needs);
***mobilisation of energy*** (raising motivation for need fulfilment);
***excitement*** (engagement of physiological energy);
***action*** (behavioural enactment);
***contact*** (meeting with an experience of satisfaction);
***withdrawal*** (natural completion and rest).

Taking this model as our guide, university culture in general, and the unit to which the author was attached in particular, may be suggested to have become stuck between "awareness" and the "mobilisation of energy". For example, some way into the negotiation process, though fully aware, the University seemed to lack the confidence to act. When teams/organisations are stuck at this point, there is much intellectual rumination but little action, for fear of unleashing powerful emotions which threaten intellectual controls. Projecting blame and holding on to hurts and angers is said to be the norm in these so called "knowing-and-angry organisations" (Critchley & Casey 1989). Organisations representative of minority groups commonly exhibit these symptoms, and the author's unit, promoting such "fringe activities" as experiential learning and humanism on a predominately engineering and technological campus, fitted neatly into this category.

After a prolonged period of floating in limbo and mounting frustration, realising it was impossible to supply the securities being demanded, the author forced the pace by re-framing the proposed off-site masters as an experiment that would tackle problems as they arose. To the University culture the notion of experimentation was kosher, and served to sanctify the fledgling partnership.

Within six months interviews were completed and a commercially based MSc was under way with a cross-section of 24 participants from management and the shop floor.

**Awakening Dragons - Fostering a Dialogical Approach to Learning**

In the introductory 3 day block, within a palatial commercial building where our cognitive agenda was to raise awareness to the nature of learning, and our affective task was to bond as a peer-learning community, participants and tutors began to evolve a way of being together. At the start of each day we spent from 30-90 minutes - depending upon the nature of the emerging issues - seated in a community circle raising attention to current individual and community learning needs, while reflecting upon the dynamics we were co-creating together. This process surfaced emerging conflicts and frustrations, while providing opportunity for tutors to resolve the same through timely facilitation. Following this checking-in process we planed how we would address the academic content of the day, inclusive of mini-lectures, experiential experiments, self-directed activity and

assignment preparation. At the close of the day participants reformed the community group to debrief, share evaluations, celebrate their gains and to say their goodbyes.

Within this first meeting a good deal of old scores and resentments surfaced. My notes of the time, recorded in field theory terms from questions surfaced by Parlett 1991, and further refined into 'external impressions', 'my internal reactions' and 'possible future action', record:

***"a) How are people and events organised here?***

***External Impressions:***
*- Historically, a core group of people appear to have lived, loved, fallen in and out of love and been friends for what seems like forever in this community.*
*- Some of the longer serving members of the community appear to take it on themselves - and be looked to by others - to police the community rules.*
*- Community members, being familiar with "other people's stuff", tend to ridicule or laugh at those who act characteristically and or true to the company stereotype.*
*- To be female in this organisation seems to confer a stronger position from which to emotionally bully others.*
*- Some individuals seem to need to over-state their difference to avoid being swamped by the group.*
***My Internal Reactions:***
*- Shock at how punitive some women of this community are permitted to be, almost as if they have divine protection or a permit to abuse.*
*- Surprise at the carefulness of the men.*
***Possible Future Action:***
*- Facilitate an all male and all female group in a fish-bowl setting?*
*- Investigate further the male and female stereotypes this culture produces?*
*- Look at the role "sex" plays as a competitive and or controlling tool?*
*- Examine how male and female roles in the community keep each other trapped?*

***b) What influences of the present field explain current behaviour?***

***External Impressions:***
*- A highly competitive group with strong players for power and dominance.*
*- Powerful members make long speeches rather than enter into dialogue with others.*
*- Tendency to "tell people how it is" rather than enquire.*
*- Competition for attention and air-time.*
***My Internal Reactions:***
*- With so much being said it is not easy to be heard or to enter gently into the group.*
***Possible Future Action:***
*- Encourage attention and more sensitive listening and role model same?*
*- Facilitate exercise in deeper levels of listening with the heart as well as the ear?*

***c) What is unique about the present field?***

***External Impressions:***
*- A gifted group of individuals who are potential stars in their own right.*
*- The organisation seems to genuinely value people and appears to offer opportunities for individuals to maximise their potential.*
*- Senior management appears person centred and caring.*
*- People appear to want a "quick fix" rather and actionable skills, rather than to mindfully and carefully acquire the same.*
*- This is "people pleasing culture" (quote).*
*- Individuals openly share their personal and transpersonal beliefs.*
*- Individuals can be very loving and caring of each other.*
*- Some individuals very committed to the organisation and some appear trapped within it.*
***My Internal Reactions:***
*- I find this group very easy to like.*
***Possible Future Action:***
*- Monitor and draw attention to the community's development?*

***d) What is in the process of becoming?***

***External Impressions:***
*- If the quieter members are permitted to stay quiet and the noisier ones noisy, the community will split into activators and those who hold hidden resentments and hurts?*
*- If things go on as they are a 1960's encounter group could become the norm?*
***My Internal Reactions:***
*- I was aware of letting this run this time round to get at the emerging pattern, so as to see the organic form this group co-creates.*
*- I was fascinated by how sophisticated and yet naive the community could be.*
***Possible Future Action:***
*- Gently encourage the quieter ones to speak and noisier ones to hold back?*
*- Challenge each individual to break their usual group pattern?*
*- Let the pattern run until the community sorts itself out?*
*- Facilitate an event that illuminates the emerging pattern?*
*- Combine the above approaches?*
*- Go with the trend and run an encounter group?*

***e) What am I blind to or excluding at this time?***

***External Impressions:***
*- I sometimes came out more strongly then I intended when policing the ground-rules of striving to be authentic, respecting others, or in focusing the group upon what was happening "now".*
*- Conflict seemed to be held onto until near the end, when all manner of grievances arose as time was conveniently running out.*
*- A tendency for senior community members to swing a little between depending and rebelling against authoritative facilitation.*

***My Inner Reactions:***

*- Having an acute sense of impatience when - in a personal biased way - I felt that "time", or "my time" was being squandered.*

*- I believe the under tone of my communication was "life is too short for us to waste playing out the usual rescuer-victim-persecutory dramas you play out to get attention here".*

*- Held back my power to let others develop their life dramas.*

***Possible Future Action:***

*- When the group is stronger state the ground-rules clearly that I am prepared to live-or-die for and invite challenge?*

*- Be less patient with repetitive deflective behaviour that appears to be getting no where?*

*- Challenge the resistance's?"*

This record, in the interests of openness was circulated and discussed with the community. It's external impressions were subsequently verified as recognisable to others. Hopefully, from my description you can begin to appreciate the emotionally expressive nature of this company, with its "tell it like it is" character and competitive "I want to be a star" culture.

Interestingly, the above description, in terms of Critchley and Casey's (1989) organisational categorisation, by fits that of the "hysterical organisation" interrupted between sensation and awareness:

> *"Organisations stuck here are in sharp contrast to the suppressed organisation - instead of denying feelings, these organisations go overboard with their feelings and much of their time is taken up with experiencing and expressing sensation. Where they fail is in extracting any sort of sense from this welter of sensation - they have plenty of excitement but they do not know what it means for the organisation's health (...) Many such organisations get stuck because by and large they enjoy the experience of sensation" (Critchley & Casey 1989).*

Another feature essential for an understanding of the company, was the emotional dependence individuals felt upon the Chairman.

The Chairman, having originally drawn the working community together, retained an immense personal following because of this earlier facilitative role. Indeed, Heelas (1987) in the 1980's had compared the company to a cult, and even now, the Chairman took very seriously indeed his obligation to provide individuals with unsolicited developmental experiences. But, as with all intimate relationships a large degree of transference proliferated. Sometimes he became so trapped within his facilitative/parental role that he enacted with gusto a "beneficent parent" one minute and a "punitive parent" the next. So personally felt were the dynamics that neutrality was rarely in the equation. He was either loved or rejected - or loving and rejecting - by turns. No doubt this was as exhausting for him as it was for others, yet, on the plus side, this intense emotional climate was felt to be generative of a good deal of heightened contact and emotional learning.

In regard to the company's earlier history and cult-like nature, a participant describing a usual working day in his subsequent master's dissertation, observed how every morning the work-force came together. To start the working day a Zilgeon gong, the large sort found in orchestras, was sounded by each person prior to their "cleaning ritual":

*"Some people just hit it others make it reverberate and the sound just grows and grows like rolling thunder.*
*We now begin the ritual of cleaning. For the next ten minutes we will silently clean our work area and any other part of the building we are allocated. Everyone has their own spray can of Pledge and a J cloth. (...) The idea here is that we experience creating our own space. (...) This cleaning is like all the showy effort you see in a theatre to prepare for the performance, which is not a bad analogy because during the day it is a show" (Pollecoff 1998).*

Following the cessation of cleaning, again sounded by the gong, a countdown to the working day was enacted:

*"Over the years the countdowns have grown more elaborate. And the movements you make whilst singing grow more complex, as a step or facial expression is added. Although there are favourites and stalwarts like 'Match of the Day' or 'Hawaii Five O' (Book him Danno') they change by the day. Today is the 'Flintstone's Countdown'.*
*'Phoners meet the phoners*
*They're a modern working family*
*When your with the phoners*
*You'll go down in history.*
*Do Da Dada Da Dada Da*
*Da Da Da Da Dada Do*
*(Everyone does a twist, during this bit)*
*(...) Ten Nine, Eight, Seven, Six, Five, Four, Three, Two, One..." (Pollecoffe 1998).*

The above gives further support to the notion that this was a dramatic histrionic company. In this light, systemically, what the University offered in terms of emotional containment and reflectivity the company obviously needed, and what the company displayed in terms of emotional expression and creativity - possibly the University needed? But then what organisations "need" and what they "want" are rarely the same thing.

**Feeling the Heat of the Dragon's Breath - Commercial Threats to Community Learning**

Two months into the programme when academia and commerce had grown more accustomed to each other, a period of stability ensued. But everything has its seasons. Some eight months into the programme a number of interesting challenges arose:

Event 1): A doctorate student acting as a bridge tutor between the University and organisation accepted a lucrative full-time position to spread peer learning throughout the company at large. *(Having a commercial background she had been least resistive to an academic-commercial partnership, and had been my closest tutorial ally during the programme's gestation. Though she would still service the MSc, she was now more "company" than "University").*

Event 2): The Chairman who had invited sold the company, up and left. *(The retirement of the Chairman, evoked within the company a response not unlike that of a trusted parent deserting his family; emotional distress on all sides was deep and long-lived, with individuals swinging between adoring and rejecting, gratitude for the past and fear of the future).*

Event 3): The author was invited to heal the organisation following the Chairman's departure. *(This took the form of communally working through the waves of shock and grief that occasioned the Chairman's leaving, and although offering rich insight into the company's culture, re-surfaced issues of inclusion and exclusion between tutors who had a central organisational role and those who did not).*

The outside world now began to actively threaten the learning community. Following the Chairman's departure the author was invited into the centre of the peer community, heatedly quizzed about the nature of his relationship with him: 'Are you still in contact with X?'; 'Do you report back to him?' etc. Though uncomfortable at the time, this regular surfacing, airing and resolution of hidden and imagined agendas helped to maintain community hygiene. X, the retiring Chairman had evolved a divisive culture where each group warred with another, while holding him special. By contrast, within the learning community, teacher and student alike were seen as accountable to the learning community, and each was openly held to account.

In the learning community a period of destabilisation echoing the company's position likewise ensued. Intense effort and energy was now invested in a life-or-death drama as the company sought to prove itself under new management. Indeed, organisational pressures now began to fragment communication and threaten the timely return of course assignments to the degree I circulated the following letter to participants:

> *"While I am accepting - and sympathetic to the fact - that commercial pressures and overseas postings make part-time study difficult, I interpret my role as Director of the external MSc as one where I am employed by you (my clients) and the conjoint partnership of the University and the commercial funding body to bring the MSc to a successful conclusion. (...) I am holding you to your contract with yourself, your company and myself, to meet the requirements of the MSc programme. (..) You may choose to feel alerted; supported; told-off; patronised or cared for. Whatever reaction and whatever you feel is fine, just as long as we open further dialogue."*

The above missive was received positively - bar one - as a supportive tutorial act. It also says masses about: anxieties myself and the tutor team entertained re commercial pressures swamping the academic boundaries; the fine balance between policing deadlines and maintaining personal support; plus the demands of an off-campus course that felt at great psychic as well as geographical distance.

**Lessons from Drawing the Dragon's Teeth - So What Really Changed?**

At the end of the workshop component of the course, prior to the research dissertation, an evaluative day was organised. We decided to approach this evaluation in the manner of a collaborative action research inquiry (Lewin 1946), with recurring cycles of:

***clarifying and planning*** - raising awareness to the purposes and structure of inquiry;
***engaging and observing*** - experientially engaging and observing the processes of investigation;
***integrating and debriefing*** - reflecting upon the value and meaning of the information raised.

This evaluation is reported at some length, as it is seen as seminal to the claims of this paper.

Upon the evaluation day the author was commissioned to record events, to write up, and to duly circulate his account to the community. He requested - and was granted - permission to publish what transpired. The following is constructed from verbatim field notes of the time.

In the check-in to the day participants begin sharing how they had changed:

> *"This experience has opened up an appreciation of the options"; "provided therapeutic insight and an intense working through of personal issues in a relatively short space of time"; "awakened me to `being' as well as `doing'".*

In relation to the cult-like culture of the company, it was also noted that the programme had:

> *"(...) encouraged life changes and a de-construction of previous notions of the self" (...) "exerted a collective effect upon the organisation - by way of setting people free from their history"; "There have also been many major life changes such as marriage; babies being born; changes of employment's; movement out of the organisation - events that were less common previously".*

In terms of learning, not only does awareness appear enhanced, there is tacit evidence for an emotional working through and a re-evaluation of self and relationships:

> *"(...) a healing process; I have become more softer, and questioning of what I'll do with the rest of my life"; "Clearer as to what is mine and what are other's processes that effect me"; (...) "Feel much more compassionate" (...) "I don't need to be angry and bullying; which I did to others as they did to me to avoid being controlled" (...) "I'm more angry and upset than before, as if it's peeled the layers off. My quality of energy is different now. More aware of organic rather than imposed change now"; (...)*

Standing back from content to examine the developing relational dynamic, the process of moving from mundane physical and social levels of engagement, to more emotionally contactful, imaginal and intuitive levels of communication, parallels a similar process to the workshop days.

Regarding the method of inquiry we will use, it is suggested we adopt a "fishbowl" format. This necessitates a circle of six chairs being placed in the centre of the larger community group, of which

participants fill five chairs, but leave one empty, so that should someone walk in another must leave, so as to keep an empty and inviting chair. Through this process speakers regularly alternate, only five people are active at any one time, others may enter and the whole community is party to discussion. With this in place, attention is now turned towards the healing effects of the learning community within the company:

> *"Emotions are more accessible now and our personal quality of life (within the organisation) has improved; for example, we can now say no". "This course has helped me integrate difficult experiences of the past (within the company), and helped me develop confidence." "Before the MSc I didn't feel qualified as a human being. So many years of negative feedback. I now value my humbleness and skill in working with people here."(...) "The course resonated with the healing and family-organisational therapy; feel more whole as a human being". "I've reinvented myself and my career on this course, and learnt the importance of beingness and being ourselves".*

Bear in mind, as this company had once been compared to a cult (Helaas 1987), perhaps it was from this legacy individuals were being freed? Indeed, keeping the affective educational domain to the fore, while building models and intellectual understanding, appears to permeated back into the workplace:

> *"The self and peer assessment felt very rich, and is starting to be integrated into the organisation more now." "Peer groups are still meeting and have generated peer sets within the company". "Tutors as peers in one sense, but recognisable authorities in another - was well handled and provided a good role model".*

But there is perceived to be an immense difference in boundaries between business and education, to the degree a warning is proffered to all humanistic educators who wish to tend their wares in a commercial culture:

> *"Boundaries in a business context are usually positive and un-negotiable. Educational ones were more humanistic and person-centred, and this may have given some people permission to break them." "There is also the difference between business being action driven and academia being reflective. Developing an attitude to work and life that is inquiry based was not easy with commercial pressures in your face".*

Developing upon this theme by exploring how cynical business and organisational values infiltrated the learning community:

> *"Trying to get away with it - fake it until you make it." "After all, we are good sales people who market things. Be, do, have - are all part of our culture." "Front, was part of our survival, and the articulation of needs was not strong here. The greater cause of work, always came before people and the group. We did not share needs for fear of looking stupid". "What is unique in this group, it's earlier history of growing-up together through personal growth seminars, fed us with family stresses".*

Later in the day we return again to how the educational community has effected organisational practice:

> *"My doing and acting is now balanced by encouragement to reflect." "Greater sensitivity in the organisation towards people and their needs". "Changes to the company have been in our completing and working through the old culture, which enabled us to put a full stop to our previous conflicts". "Facilitated cultural change with the new company take-over and helped us re-create our culture". "We have re-committed to values we once held dear; such as person-centredness and growth".*

Re the "hysterical culture" earlier described:

> *"We have moved from a panicky culture to one more accepting of new people". (...) "the course kept us sane through a very organisationally traumatising time. The course helped to build-up our new culture." (...) "This group processed something for the organisation, and took this back again resolved in part. The old way had reached the end of the road and the course gave the company a new direction. Look how the company has doubled in size since the MSc began!" (...) "We now have a new lease of life, structure and capability for sustaining people centred values that provide support and in turn influence our client relations. Increased skills means increased charge-out rates to clients".*

In the final minutes participants share their appreciation of the inquiry process. What began as a rather mechanistic and intellectual task, is observed to have transformed into a richly experiential and flowing process, as is usually the case when people are encouraged to be reflective "human-beings" rather than over-busy "human-doings".

Taking this paper's earlier description of the community in its initial meeting (see section entitled 'Awakening Dragon's') as a base-line, there appears to be less dependence, less distress reaching out from the past, less competition, the "stars" seem less in ascendance and the community appears to have become self-facilitating. I speculate that learners in a Gestalt informed peer learning community, in feeling more seen, heard and cared for, have less need to politically and emotionally act-out their distress.

**Change - A Phoenix or a Death-Knell?**

From the foregoing study it would appear substantial gains were made in developing individuals in areas of self and interpersonal awareness, in fostering motivation and an appreciation of team and organisational dynamics. The person-valuing culture of the community appears to have also supported individuals through the hiatus of a change of company ownership and done much to heal trauma of the past, while building individual resilience.

Reflecting upon the ability of the peer learning community to facilitate organisational change, it is suggested there was transfer of learning from the course community to the organisation.

Regarding the feasibility of a learning community - within the framework of a masters - serving to promote personal and professional development, team building, quality supervision and organisational renewal, participant feedback attests some success in this regard.

As I write this paper in May 2001, all who participated in the programme have left the company. All bar one - who left in the first block - completed the taught component of the course to achieve a post-graduate diploma. Five fifths have gained the MSc, three are still working on their dissertation, two have opted for the diploma and two have gone on forward to doctorate study. And this from a cohort who were primarily without a first degree and came in via non-traditional entry.

Post the chairman's departure the company doubled, then trebled in size. Over-expansion and a drive to replace "the old" with "the new" led to redundancies, and most of the course participants at this time chose to work free-lance. So, in company terms, was this experiment representative of a phoenix or a death-knell? Evidence from on-going conversations and an informal appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivasta 1987) conducted in a conference setting, suggests it challenged those personal and institutional patterns - remnants of the earlier cult culture - that kept people and the organisation stuck, and in so doing increased the options all round.

**Change Agency - Some Reflections upon the Change Agent's Role**

So what has the author learnt from the above experience?

First, I came to realise the paradoxical nature of change, that it is better to raise awareness and to build in community support than to aim to change something or somebody directly.

Second, I appreciate the truth of Stapley's (1996) observation that change agents have responsibility for "relating to the emotional and cognitive state" of a client system, and should see themselves as parent-like, temporarily sustaining a holding environment wherein clients can be facilitated beyond unhelpful methods of thinking and behaving, and supported while they deal with the anxiety and uncertainty that accompanies change. As a supportive container, the peer learning community performed its function excellently.

Third, I came to recognise that organisations make collective demands of the individual that infiltrate and subjugate them to a `collective consciousness' which `sucks them into the personality structure of the group', with the consequence that when the organisation is threatened, the individual becomes threatened. From this perspective, a change agent romantically represents a St. George-like figure, a slayer of dragons, who struggles to release the organisation's grip on individual and his `still small voice reflective wisdom'. The peer learning community was an asset here.

Finally, I came to realise the importance of continually clarifying `contractual' and `idealised' levels of communication within the community, while maintaining and fostering a dialogue with the "authentic level" core truths of all involved.

**Epilogue - a Final Synthesis**

Boud and Walker (1998) have drawn attention to the need for reflection to be supported by the cultural, social and political context. The learning community described in this paper represents a vehicle well suited to this purpose. As to the form reflection takes within the peer community described in this paper, earlier inquiry into the same (Barber 1990; 1996) suggests that Gestalt influence stimulates reflection upon phenomenon associated with physical-sensory, social-cultural, emotional-transferential, imaginal-projective and intuitive-transpersonal levels of experience (see Figure 1).

Looking wider afield, alienation and depersonalisation have for long been recognised to attend work (Merton 1968), organisational life (Herrick & Maccaby 1975) and modern living (Josephson & Josephson 1972). If we are to leave these behind as we enter the 21st Century, we will need to educate people and organisations in a different way to how we do at present. The Gestalt informed peer-learning community points to one such alternative, and tried and tested 'different' way at that. Indeed, the research-minded culture of a Gestalt informed community, in the author's experience, also provides a fitting medium for the study and facilitation of those emergent creative influences complexity and chaos theorists (Reason & Goodwin 1999) seek to address within organisational life.

> *"Contemporary society worships at the alter of functionalism. Concepts such as process, method, model and project have come to infiltrate our language and determine how we describe our relation to the world. The recovery of soul means the a rediscovery of Otherness; this would awaken again the sense of mystery, possibility and compassion. Stated philosophically, being could find expression in doing" (O'Donohue 1997, p179).*

**Figure 1**

## EXPERIENTIAL LEVELS OF REFLECTION

i) **Reflecting upon Physical-Sensory Phenomenon:**
[Gathering and attending to sensory information - developing sensory intelligence]

Learning to observe and listen:- attending to the environment; focusing upon what is presented; identifying physical support systems; differentiating between thoughts and feelings and observations; developing awareness and sensitivity to our physiological needs.

ii) **Reflecting upon Social-Cultural Phenomenon:**
[Relating and understanding the cultural context - developing social intelligence]

Learning about how we socially and intellectually structure and relate:- forming rules and roles; informing others; prescribing; reflecting in a critical way; defining the purpose and task; building a learning community; creating a safe environment; meeting relational needs.

iii) **Reflecting upon Emotional-Transferential Phenomenon:**
[Expressing and directing emotional energy - developing emotional intelligence]

Learning about our emotional responses and patterns:- understanding and expressing feelings; releasing blockages of emotional energy; reviewing how our present relates to our past; raising awareness to family scripts; releasing ourselves from the presenting past.

iv) **Reflecting upon Imaginal-Projective Phenomenon:**
[Exploring and integrating imagination with the self - developing self intelligence]

Learning about the hidden self:- identifying our sub-personalities; illuminating inner motives and ego defences; unpacking how imagination informs us; exploring our persona and ego needs; undoing projective identifications and control dramas; raising the shadow.

v) **Reflecting upon Intuitive-Transpersonal Phenomenon:**
[Becoming and speculating upon potential beyond the self - developing intuitive intelligence]

Learning about how and where we belong:- valuing ourselves and others; becoming authentic and identifying core values; developing holistic vision; illuminating your life's purpose; awakening to wisdom above and beyond the self; relating ourselves to the cosmos.

(Paul Barber 2001)

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